

Truth, Inquiry, and the Prospect for Moral Knowledge

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The prospect for objectivity and determinate truth-values in the realm of moral inquiry has certainly gained greater sympathy in recent years. Traditional arguments from logical positivists, which maintained that value judgements, as opposed to factual judgements, were devoid of meaning or, at best, some lower order of non-cognitive meaning have been abandoned (Misak, 1994, 39). Even with the rejection of the legitimacy of such views, there is still a tendency to differentiate mathematical or logical propositions from those of the moral or political realm based on their formalism. While opening the door to the possibility of a cognitivist account of ethics, this has resulted in a state of affairs whereby moral claims or beliefs are at worst not considered sufficient to be considered candidates for objective truth-values, or, at best, admits a two-tiered truth pluralism wherein empirical propositions are considered *more* true than moral propositions.

Those anticipating my argument may be expecting a re-hashing of some form of realism in which the possibility of objective truth-values can be realized. However, the prospect of achieving genuine moral beliefs is not to be found in the believer-independent metaphysics of some correspondence-based realism advanced by philosophers such as Michael Dummett who, while maintaining the possibility of objective truth-values, render the truth or falsity of such propositions independent of the inquirer's understanding. Instead, what is needed is a competing epistemic account that holds a view that the truth of a particular belief or proposition does not go beyond experience and inquiry. I contend that this account is to be found in pragmatism. The pragmatic epistemology originated by C. S. Peirce (1839-1913), and subsequently developed by contemporary pragmatists such as Cheryl Misak and Christopher Hookway in their recent works *Truth, Politics, and Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* and *Truth, Rationality and Pragmatism: Themes from Peirce* provides an elucidation and improvement of Peirce's account of truth and an ideal normative framework in which a persuasive case can be made for the possibility of objective moral knowledge.

The focus of this paper will be to demonstrate that the success of the pragmatic view lies in its ability to illustrate that both empirical and moral propositions have determinate content that, when asserted, leads to consequences and commitments; when unpacked, these commitments show that genuine beliefs, including moral beliefs, aim at truth and thus strive for objectivity. Moreover, I will argue that such an account will provide not only a robust account of truth that admits moral propositions as candidates for determinate truth-values, but also sufficiently defends against the spectre of moral relativism without resorting to cultural imperialism. Although such an account in moral philosophy - one that places truth at its core - appears different from much of the contemporary discourse, it just may be what is needed to firmly establish the attainment of genuine moral knowledge.

I. Genuine Beliefs and the Commitments of Inquiry

In "The Fixation of Belief," Peirce argues that a true belief is one that is fated to be agreed upon were we to inquire as far as we could. Cheryl Misak improves this notion of truth to read that a "true belief is one upon which inquiry could not improve - a belief which would fit with experience and argument and which would satisfy the aims of inquiry, no matter how much the issue was subject to experiment, evaluation, and debate" (2000, 1). The pragmatist rejects the correspondence theory of truth on the basis that it disconnects truth from the practice of inquiry (i.e., a proposition's veracity is not dependent on what evidence can speak for or against it). From an epistemic perspective, this pragmatic construct throws a lifeline to truth and objectivity and rescues it from the mind-independent metaphysics that has fallen into derision. Instead, we put in its place a process of inquiry in which we strive to obtain the *best* belief - with "best" denoting a belief that would fit with available evidence, argumentation, and knowledge. On this view, we maintain an account of truth that does not go beyond experience. Although Peirce did not devote an inordinate amount of time to discussing moral philosophy, his work in epistemology does set a solid foundation for the possibility of genuine moral knowledge.

Christopher Hookway reinforces the importance of the internal connection between assertion and truth in the pragmatic account of truth when he states that "every assertion that we

make involves a commitment to the *truth* of the asserted proposition" (62). Thus, our commitment to a proposition's truth is manifested in our practice that to assert proposition "*p*" is analogous to asserting: "*p* is true." However, we will see that we will want to distinguish this view from that of the minimalist or disquotationalist views, for under Peirce's assertoric account, we obtain a more robust account of truth (and this will have important implications for moral inquiry, as we shall see).¹ A view of truth expressed by the minimalist does not go far enough in linking truth and inquiry, for the disquotationalist schema does not express the commitments that we incur in discourse, and as a result is not sufficient to account for the expectations and features of a true belief that is necessary for inquiry (Misak, 2000, 59).

According to Hookway, Peirce's account of truth is best understood not as a method of explaining the meaning of a proposition's truth, but rather as an account of the commitments we incur when we assert a proposition. When we assert a proposition, it is done under the belief that it is the best belief according to the available evidence and argumentation, and it would stand up to future inquiry. However, we are also committed to the view that under subsequent experience, our beliefs may be thrown into doubt, which may necessitate modification or abandonment for a new belief.

Yet Hookway adds an important qualification in this pragmatic account of truth – he argues that Peirce holds that when we assert a proposition "the content of what I commit myself to can be somewhat indeterminate" (57). The case in which truth is indeterminate, yet reality is determinate will "...involve quite a complex propositional attitude, one that uses the concept of truth to articulate an ideal to which the asserted proposition does not fully measure up. In that case, asserting a proposition commits me to its 'approximate truth,' not exactly its truth" (64-5). Such commitments are tied into Peirce's fallibilism; since we can never really know when we have reached the best belief, we need to focus on the process and aims of inquiry itself. History reveals that previous beliefs (both empirical and moral), which we thought were absolute or could not be improved upon, were subsequently revised or invalidated on further evidence or argumentation. Inquiry is an active process in which new evidence and justifications continually test our beliefs, and if doubt is cast on a particular belief, the opportunity is provided under

the pragmatic account that allows for subsequent refinement or replacement of that belief.

II. Dissolution of the Fact/Value Dichotomy

Recall that under Misak's improvement of Peirce's account of truth, a true belief is one that best fits with evidence and argumentation, and we would expect it to stand up to recalcitrant experience. Yet it will be necessary to briefly elaborate on the process of good inquiry and how we arrive at these *best* beliefs, for on Hookway's account, "if we cannot do this, then Peirce's claims about truth become trivial and uninteresting – an inquiry counts as good enough only when it contributes to producing agreement, even if we cannot say in detail what was good about the inquirer's activities" (51). In both empirical and moral areas of discourse, we tend to adopt a method of inquiry which results in agreement and convergence – what Peirce called the "scientific method." What is important on Peirce's construal of such a method is that it takes experience seriously, and has a very broad account that what experience consists in.

Unlike the classical empiricists or logical positivists who took a thin and constrained view of experience to include only perceptual evidence from the sensory world that could speak for or against the veracity of a particular belief, on Peirce's account, experience is much more broadly construed as that which impinges on us – all "compulsions of thought" (*Vol. 8*, paragraph 101). Experience is more than what can be seen, heard, and felt in the physical world, but anything that is "to be classed under the species of perception wherein a positive qualitative content is forced upon one's acknowledgement without reason or pretension to reason" (*Vol. 7*, paragraph 623). The central role of experience, especially such a broad construal, under the Peircian notion of pragmatism is imperative because it appears to leave room for all propositions and beliefs (especially those concerned with morality) to qualify as genuine and objective.

However, if the pragmatist is to succeed in the establishment of genuine moral knowledge, it will be necessary to dissolve the fact/value dichotomy. It will not be necessary to show that beliefs and propositions from empirical discourse are analogous to those in moral discourse, but only to show that both maintain similar aims and commitments. Misak advocates the need to adopt a radical holism that does not result in "driving a

wedge between various sorts of inquiry" and instead focus on the features and commitments of areas of genuine inquiry in which determinate truth-values are to be found to see if moral propositions can measure up (2000, 84).

On the view of classical empiricists and logical positivists, all genuine beliefs originated and were verified by perceptual experience of the physical world. Yet it was well-recognized that particular areas of scientific inquiry such as mathematics and logic, while thought to be objective and candidates for truth-values, could not meet the test of experience. Hence, we were left with the analytic/synthetic distinction, which while acknowledging the inability of perceptual experience to verify mathematical or logical beliefs, allowed for a dualism in which these propositions were accorded a greater level of legitimacy in our inquiries. However, even with the admittance of the Quine/Duhem Thesis, which rejects the distinction between the analytic and synthetic on the grounds that synthetic statements fail the empiricist test, mathematical and logical propositions were still accorded a legitimacy in our inquiries, which, while not independently verifiable, were taken to be objective and candidates for truthvalues (85).

On Misak's account, since the view that Quine was promoting jettisons the traditional empiricist dichotomy, there is nothing substantive that can be proffered from the exclusion of moral judgements from the realm of genuine belief. If both empirical and moral areas of inquiry are aiming at achieving the best beliefs – beliefs that fit with theoretical and observational experience – "there is no *prima facie* reason for denying moral inquiry a place in our search for truth" (86). If we take the process of inquiry seriously, that is, take it to have the aim of discovering genuine beliefs with determinate truth-values, there is no reason to suppose that given the dissolution of the fact/value dichotomy and the broad Peircian view of experience, we are not strongly warranted in treating moral inquiry as a genuine and objective area of inquiry.

The view of radical holism that Misak advances is attractive for it maintains an account of knowledge that requires genuine beliefs to be accountable to experience – to the reasons and evidence that strive to throw it into doubt. It is a view that, by making experience the "new empirical test," strikes a difficult balance between not prejudicing particular areas on inquiry

based on artificial distinctions and maintaining a robust account that does not require the devaluing of empirical propositions to meet the needs of moral propositions. However, the pragmatist does not want to advance a position that maintains that statements from areas of inquiry such as physics and morality are analogous in every way. What the pragmatist has done is to show that if we take a view of inquiry to be the achievement of true beliefs that are resistant to recalcitrant evidence, we should be able to see why moral beliefs can aspire to truth and objectivity and can be good candidates for determinate truth-values. As Misak succinctly points out, once we can see that under Peirce's account the line between fact and value is blurred, in that both classes of belief (e.g. empirical and moral) are both constrained by experience, we are warranted in expecting that inquiry into these matters will result in determinate answers (1994, 44). Both empirical and moral beliefs are acquired through the same perceptual set and both are vulnerable to doubt and reclassification by recalcitrant experience.

III. Moral Inquiry, Pluralism, and Relativism

"Moral deliberation has many marks of objectivity – the distinction between thinking that one (or one's culture) is right and being right, the use of moral beliefs in inferences, the thought that we can discover that something is right or wrong and improve our views, and the thought that it is appropriate, or even required, that we give reasons and arguments for our beliefs, to name a few" (Misak, 2000, 52). The objectivity of moral propositions lies in their sensitivity to recalcitrant evidence and argumentation. If we were really a bunch of subjectivists who believe that appeal to objective moral values were specious, why do we deliberate and dispute so much about morality? I am inclined to believe that we take moral inquiry seriously because we believe that there is something to get correct – there is a right and a wrong answer. We hope that there will be an upshot to our activities, namely determinate answers with true-values.

The qualifications of our beliefs, which tend to be more predominant in moral inquiry, show that as an area of discourse, it is not as clean and ordered as mathematics. However, the desire to abandon our project of moral knowledge on the basis of these qualifications is misguided. In actuality, no area of discourse is free from the need for qualification. If it is a legitimate

area of inquiry, inquirers will be continually striving for obtaining the best belief. Even if it is conceded that qualification in areas of discourse such as morality and politics is more prevalent than in the natural and physical sciences, the same fact remains – both empirical and moral areas of inquiry aim at getting the best belief supported by available evidence and argumentation, and as a result are vulnerable to qualification. Quite paradoxically, the qualification of moral beliefs is seen as a weakness; however, the phenomenology of moral inquiry should establish that “our practice of justifying moral belief speaks against the non-cognitivist. It speaks against those who do not think there is good reason to see moral belief as being objective – those who think that the best explanation of a person’s moral judgements is always a story about the person’s cultural background or upbringing” (52).

Yet we still run into difficulties. For showing that the project of genuine moral knowledge is cognitive may be necessary, but it is not sufficient—even J. L. Mackie agrees that moral claims pass any reasonable test for cognitive content; however, such a state of affairs does not necessitate the jump to viewing moral claims as objective. Such objections are not novel; philosophers such as David Hume and G. E. Moore have raised similar claims in the past. In the desire to show that moral knowledge can be objective, the pragmatist is not interested in making the case for some absolutist notion such as a categorical imperative or some form of act utilitarianism.

The pragmatist admits in certain areas of moral inquiry there will be underdetermination, and as a result there will be instances of conflict between moral principles or morally permissible actions where it appears that there will be no upshot to our inquiry. Does this indicate the absence of authenticity of objective moral judgements (and the project)? I do not believe the evidence bears out such a conclusion. Although this does necessitate caution, it does not indicate systematic relativism or doubt about the validity of moral judgements as truth-value candidates, for no belief is immune from revision or doubt. Although there is a higher frequency in moral inquiry as opposed to mathematical inquiry, both areas of inquiry aim at achieving the best belief – a belief that fits with available evidence, argumentation, and knowledge.

The strength of the pragmatist project lies in its ability to

(in the midst of divergent opinions and values) provide a robust account of ethics that can objectively criticize particular beliefs or actions as amoral, without resorting to cultural imperialism. Misak provides a persuasive argument for why such a state of affairs of substantive homogeneity in morality is not problematic:

But the fact that the compulsion of internal experience is less pervasive and less persuasive and less insistent means that the apparent lack of consensus on moral matters does not pose a serious problem for the Peircian project. There is a remarkable amount of consensus with respect to moral judgements and this can be explained by the force of internal experience. Any lack of consensus can be explained *away* by the fact that the way things are in the moral world does not impinge upon us in quite the same way things are in the empirical world. Thus, there is nothing debilitating about some (or many) undetermined moral questions. (1994, 45)

The pragmatist will not want to assert that resolution of ethical dilemmas will be as clear-cut and uncontroversial as solving a mathematical problem – they are clearly two different areas of discourse. Yet this lower level of consensus and agreement on moral matters does not necessitate that we give up on the project of truth and objectivity in morality. It is this challenge – what John Rawls calls the “fact of pluralism” – which the pragmatist must face if the prospect for moral knowledge will be successful.

We can accommodate the reality of pluralism in Western society under Peirce’s cognitivist account without succumbing to moral relativism. The pragmatist provides the only persuasive account which counters the relativist charge that an absence of agreement or performance of moral customs or actions is sufficient to establish that there is no trace of objectivity in moral inquiry.² But the pragmatist will be the first to admit that morality is a special area of inquiry that does not easily admit to universalization. “We cannot be quite sure that the community ever will settle down to an unalterable conclusion upon any given question. Even if they do so for the most part, we have no reason to think the unanimity will be quite complete, nor can we rationally presume any overwhelming *consensus* of opinion will be reached upon every question” (Peirce, 1935, paragraph 610).

Moreover, the pragmatist will need to be careful when

placing truth at the center of his or her ethical account; that one particular conception of the good is not endorsed as *the* good, and the rest designated as false or amoral. The pragmatist acknowledges that human lives are better governed internally, and she will not want to dictatorially pick one particular conception of the good life and force it upon everybody. Instead, pragmatism works well with our democratic liberal practices in which it is recognized that our lives are better governed internally and that individuals can subscribe to numerous acceptable conceptions of the good (Misak, 1994, 48). While in a pluralistic society, we will find many well-formed and permissible conceptions of the good life that all have one thing in common. Each comprehensive doctrine is promoting a conception of the good which results in the production of moral judgements with an associative truth-value that we *hope* will not be overturned by subsequent evidence and argumentation.

But a pressing problem remains – although we can maintain that moral beliefs strive towards truth and objectivity, how does the pragmatist avoid what Paul Taylor called the *ethnocentric fallacy* (563-4)? How do we avoid designating non-liberal values as false (because they do not accord with our own)? It almost becomes an exercise of determining not whether the moral judgements are true, but whether they accord with Western values! The pragmatist will want to be wary of such a state of affairs because she will want to maintain Peirce's account of the "community of inquiries." Unlike some contemporary pragmatists of Richard Rorty's stripe, who argue for the existence of various communities of inquirers (which inevitably lead to relativism), we are better served with Peirce's conception whereby there is only one community of inquirers – all inquirers bound by the requirement to justify their beliefs and actions to the entire community of inquirers, and not particular segments of it. If we are to escape from charges of relativism in the realm of moral inquiry, it will be essential to hold all inquirers accountable to the commitments of truth and objectivity, and not allow particular beliefs or actions that are resistant to recalcitrant experience.

It provides the only substantive argument against substantive homogeneity or the jack-booted thugs who come to take you away in the night that is epistemically robust. We can say that such conceptions are certainly not in the interest of converging on *the* best conception of the good life, but simply and

advantageously can identify a conjunction of permissible conceptions of the good life that fit with available evidence and argumentation. For instance, while Catholicism or vegetarianism would be considered acceptable conceptions of the good life, anarchism and Nazism would not be, and could be soundly criticized, for views of discrimination and violence do not aim at beliefs that fit with available argumentation, reasons, and evidence. "Thus there is room for underdetermination and pluralism in a Peircian view of the objective status of moral judgements. Our moral inquiries are legitimized without positing a correspondence between our moral judgements and moral facts, and without cultural imperialism. For an account of the truth of moral judgements that initially looked so implausible, this, I suggest, is no small thing" (Misak, 1994, 48).

Conclusion

Knowing that all empirical and moral propositions and beliefs are vulnerable to recalcitrant evidence or argumentation, the pragmatic epistemology of Peirce's stripe is the only account that can maintain philosophically robust and identify serious areas of inquiry that strive for truth and objectivity.

The pragmatist does not want to suggest that propositions such as "The contemplative life is the good life" and " $2 + 2 = 4$ " should be seen as analogous entities entitled to identical levels of certainty and reasonableness. To think otherwise would misconstrue the aspiration of what the pragmatic elucidation can bring in the area of genuine moral knowledge. What should be taken away from such an account is that in genuine areas of discourse, the process of inquiry will be aiming for truth.

In the area of moral inquiry, for instance, when dealing with the question of the good life, the strength of the pragmatic cognitivist position is not that it promises to identify the one, true conception of the good – instead, the pragmatic epistemology can identify various well-formed and rational conceptions of the good life, while being able to mount a robust challenge to amoral or illogical conceptions such as those advanced by the Nazis. It can provide a substantive objection and criticism of amoral beliefs or actions, while forcing relativists and sceptics to hide in the corner. One cannot make the case, as the relativist or sceptic does, that morality is simply a matter of expressing one's subjective preferences and dislikes, and then turn around and tell a

group like the Nazis that genocide is wrong – it is only an account which places truth and objectivity at the center of moral inquiry that will allow us to levy justified criticism. Pragmatism provides such an account.

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NOTES

¹ The minimalist or disquotationalist view simply states that a proposition is true if and only if the state of affairs it represents is true [*“p”* is true if and only if *p*]. An instance of this account of truth would be: “grass is green” is true if and only if grass is green. Thus, the truth of the proposition “grass is green” is only true if in fact grass is actually green.

² Relativists will often charge that it is the *de facto* absence of uniform adherence to moral beliefs and actions between different communities or nations that proves that morality is not objective. It is often charged that empirical disciplines, such as science, are the same in the world no matter where you go – there is not such thing, for instance, as Chinese

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